ROCKEFELLER CHAPEL

LUTHERAN SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT CHICAGO

JANUARY 9, 1994 - 4:00 P.M.

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IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF MY YOUTH IN CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA WE NEVER SAID WORDS LIKE EPIPHANY. IN FACT, UNTIL THE SONG CAME ALONG I DIDN'T KNOW THERE WERE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS. FOR ME, ALL THE ACTION WAS PRE-DECEMBER 25; PARTIES, CAROLING, SHOPPING, THE DELICIOUS ALMOST UNBEARABLE WAITING, AND THEN LATE IN THE MORNING, A TREMENDOUS LET DOWN, ALL THE AIR OUT OF THE BAL-LOON.

WITH A LITTLE PLEADING I COULD ALWAYS PERSUADE MY PARENTS TO ALLOW THE

TREE TO REMAIN FOR A FEW DAYS, BUT BY JANUARY 1 CHRISTMAS WAS, AS THEY SAY, HISTORY.

I SUPPOSE IT IS THE ULTIMATE PRE-EMPT. THE CULTURE, WITH AN ASSIST FROM US LOW-CHURCH TYPES, CONVINCING US OF THE IRRELEVANCE OF ONE OF OUR OLDEST TRADITIONS - THE FEAST OF CHRISTMASTIDE, THE TWELVE DAYS BRACKETED BY THE BIRTH AND THE ARRIVAL OF THE WISE MEN TWELVE DAYS LATER.

IN MY CHILDHOOD IMAGINATION THEY ARRIVED ON CHRISTMAS EVE, SHORTLY AFTER THE SHEPHERDS LEFT. THAT'S HOW IT HAPPENS IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL PAGEANTS. THE SHEPHERDS CAN'T STAY LONG: THEY HAVE TO GET BACK TO THEIR SHEEP. THE MAGI, MORE SOPHISTICATED AND ELEGANT, ARRIVE FASHIONABLY LATE, AROUND MID-NIGHT.

Raymond Brown reminds us that the early church preferred and celebrated this story. Shepherds, after all, were common, rough, rude - the contemporary equivalent of parking lot attendants, Garrison Keillor says. Strangers from the east, mysterious astronomers, bearing exotic gifts were intriguing.

Brown traces the growth of the Magi tradition... apart from scripture - royalty, three in number... with names, racial identity. Their relics have traveled more than they ever did, from Persia to Constantinople, to Milan, to Cologne, where you can peer down through an opening in a metal box and see them today. You can read a plaque there that tells you that they met in 54 A.D. in Armenia and celebrated Christmas and

THEN ALL DIED; MELCHOIR ON JANUARY 1, BALTHAZAR ON JANUARY 5 AND GASPAR ON JANUARY 11.

THERE IS NO REASON, OF COURSE, WHY ONE HAS TO DECIDE BETWEEN MATTHEW AND LUKE, COMMIT TO BEING A MAGI PERSON OR A SHEPHERD PERSON. SHEPHERDS SEEM SO MUCH MORE ROMANTIC, SHEEP SO CUDDLY, AND AS CHARMING AS "AMAHL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS" IS, IT CAN'T BEGIN TO COMPARE IN SHEER HAIR RAISING EXUBERANCE WITH GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL'S ANGEL CHORUS FOR MESSIAH, "GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST" AND "HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING" VERSUS "WE THREE KINGS?" NO CONTEST. "WE THREE KINGS" WHICH NOT ONLY GOES ON FOR EVER IN 3/8 TIME, HAS THE AUDACITY IN STANZA FIVE TO DRAG INTO OUR CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION -

BITTER PERFUME - GATHERING GLOOM -
SORROWING, SIGHING, BLEEDING, DYING
SEALED IN THE STONE COLD TOUCH.
NO WONDER WE PREFER THE SHEPHERDS.

IN HER WONDERFUL BESTSELLER, DAKOTA, A SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY, KATHLEEN NORRIS TELLS ABOUT BEING INVITED TO SERVE AS A LAY PREACHER IN THE TINY CHURCH SHE ATTENDED, AND REFLECTS ON LEADING WORSHIP IN A WAY THAT SOUNDED FAMILIAR TO ME.

"EVERY TIME I READ THE SCRIPTURES ALOUD IN THE SUNDAY SERVICE, I BECAME AWARE OF SPARKS IN THOSE TEXTS THAT I HAD MISSED." [P. 172]

THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENS TO ME WHEN I READ MATTHEW 2 OUTLOUD.

SPARKS! THE GLORIOUS UNIVERSALISM OF IT ALL, RIGHT HERE, AT THE BEGINNING, AT THE MANGER, THE BASIC INTENT AND CAPACITY OF THIS STORY, THIS NEWS, THIS

VENTURE, TO TRANSCEND CULTURE, RACE, ETHNICITY, NATION, TO AFFIRM IN ITS ADVENT THE UNITY OF HUMANKIND. THESE ARE NOT HEBREW PROPHETS: THEY AREN'T' JEWS. THEY ARE ARABS. EAST MEANS IRAN, IRAQ, SAUDI ARABIA. AND THE JOURNEY, THE DECISION TO LEAVE WHEREVER THEY WERE AND FOLLOW A STAR AND THEN TO BE FORCED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT, HAVING BEEN THERE, HAVE SEEN, THEY MUST NOW TRAVEL HOME ANOTHER WAY.

MR. ELIOT, AS PROFESSOR SITTLER ALWAYS AFFECTIONATELY CALLED HIM, CAPTURES IT:

"A COLD COMING WE HAD OF IT,
JUST THE WORST TIME OF THE YEAR
FOR A JOURNEY, AND SUCH A LONG JOURNEY:
THE WAYS DEEP AND THE WEATHER SHARP,
THE VERY DEAD OF WINTER...

THERE WERE TIMES WE REGRETTED

THE SUMMER PALACES ON SLOPES, THE TERRACES,

AND THE SILKEN GIRLS BRINGING SHERBET.

THEN THE CAMEL MEN CURSING AND GRUMBLING

AND RUNNING AWAY, AND WANTING THEIR LIQUOR AND WOMEN,

AND THE NIGHT-FIRES GOING OUT, AND THE LACK OF SHELTERS,

AND THE CITIES HOSTILE AND THE TOWNS UNFRIENDLY

AND THE VILLAGES DIRTY AND CHARGING HIGH PRICES;

A HARD TIME WE HAD OF IT.

AT THE END WE PREFERRED TO TRAVEL ALL NIGHT,

SLEEPING IN SNATCHES,

WITH THE VOICES SINGING IN OUR EARS, SAYING

THAT THIS WAS ALL FOLLY."

IT WAS A HARD JOURNEY... AND THE HARDEST PART OF ALL WAS THEIR OWN DOUBT, THEIR SENSE THAT IT MAY BE FOLLY. YEARS LATER ONE OF THEM LOOKS BACK AND SAYS:

"ALL THIS WAS A LONG TIME AGO, I REMEMBER,

AND I WOULD DO IT AGAIN, BUT SET DOWN

THIS SET DOWN

THIS: WERE WE LED ALL THAT WAY FOR

BIRTH OR DEATH? THERE WAS A BIRTH, CERTAINLY,

WE HAD EVIDENCE AND NO DOUBT, I HAD SEEN BIRTH AND DEATH,

BUT HAD THOUGHT THEY WERE DIFFER-ENT; THIS BIRTH WAS

HARD AND BITTER AGONY FOR US, LIKE DEATH, OUR DEATH.

WE RETURNED TO OUR PLACES, THESE KINGDOMS,

BUT NO LONGER AT EASE HERE, IN THE OLD DISPENSATION,

WITH AN ALIEN PEOPLE CLUTCHING THEIR GODS.

I SHOULD BE GLAD OF ANOTHER DEATH."

[T. S. ELIOT, "JOURNEY OF THE MAGI," THE WASTELAND AND OTHER POEMS, P. 69-70]

WE DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT THEM. THE NOUN IS PLURAL; THERE WERE MORE THAN ONE. THEY KNEW ABOUT STARS, THEY HAD THE CAPACITY TO TRAVEL AND TO GIVE AWAY EXPENSIVE GIFTS. FORGET ALL THAT - LISTEN TO THEIR STORY WHEN IT SAYS THEY ARRIVE IN JERUSALEM, ANCIENT CAPITAL OF THE JEWS, NOW OCCUPIED BY THE ROMANS AND THEY CALL AT THE ROYAL PALACE WHERE THEY ASSUME A ROYAL BIRTH HAS TAKEN PLACE. PRESIDING IN THE PALACE IS HEROD, WHO IN ORDER TO CONSOLIDATE HIS OWN POSITION WITH THE ROMANS, HAS MURDERED MEMBERS OF

HIS OWN IMMEDIATE FAMILY. WHEN THE EMPEROR CAESAR AUGUSTUS HEARS ABOUT IT, HE SAYS, "I'D RATHER BE HEROD'S PIG THAN HIS SON.

HOW INEXCUSABLY INNOCENT THEY ARE, THESE WISE MEN. PROFESSOR BROWN SAYS THEY ACT LIKE NOTHING SO MUCH AS ABSENT MINDED PROFESSORS - ASKING HEROD WHO MURDERS HIS OWN BABIES TO PROTECT HIS FLANKS - WHERE THE NEW KING WAS BORN.

"BETHEHEM... FROM YOU SHALL COME A RULER..." "IT'S BETHLEHEM, MICAH SAID SO."

JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN WHOSE NEWEST BOOK TIME MAGAZINE DOESN'T LIKE AT ALL, COMMENTS:

"THERE ARE IRONIC REVERSALS... PAGAN WISE MEN READ THE STARS AND COME FROM AFAR TO ACCEPT JESUS, WHILE HEROD READS THE JEWISH SCRIPTURES AND SEEKS TO KILL HIM." [P. 15, JESUS, A REVOLUTION-

ARY BIOGRAPHY]

THINK OF THE IRONY. THE CHILD MURDERING TYRANT GETS FROM THE SCHOLARLY COMMUNITY THE INFORMATION THE PAGAN ASTRONOMERS NEED TO FIND THE MESSIAH. THE KING SENDS THEM - FIVE MILES DOWN THE ROAD - TO BETHLEHEM. THINK OF THE IRONY - THE SPARKS. WHEN FINALLY THEY GET IT, WARNED IN A DREAM MATTHEW SAYS DIPLOMATICALLY; WHEN THEY MAKE A DECISION TO PROTECT THE CHILD'S IDENTITY, THEY BECOME UNWITTING ACCOMPLICES TO THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS. THERE'S A LOT GOING ON IN THIS WONDERFUL SHORT STORY!

MEANWHILE THEY GO TO BETHLEHEM. IT WAS PROBABLY THE ONLY INN IN TOWN. THEY PROBABLY STAYED THERE. AND MAYBE WHEN THEIR SERVANTS TOOK THEIR CAMELS OR HORSES OR DONKEYS OUT BACK TO THE BARN THEY WERE STARTLED TO SEE A FAMILY AND

WHEN THE CURIOUS FACT WAS MENTIONED, MAYBE A SPARK WENT OFF FOR THEM, AND LIKE THE MYSTERIOUS LIGHT OF THE STAR THEY HAD BEEN FOLLOWING, MAYBE ONE OF THEM CONCLUDED THAT HAVING COME SO FAR TO FIND A CHILD AND HAVING STUMBLED ON TO ONE, HE SHALL HAVE THE GIFTS. AND THEN THEY LEAVE FOR THEIR COUNTRY BY A DIFFERENT ROAD.

IF THE ------- IS THE PLACE WHERE THEMES ARE FIRST ENUNCIATED, IF THE PROLOGUE IS THE TIME WHEN AN ACTOR MAKES A SPEECH BEFORE THE DRAMA BEGINS, ANNOUNCING THE MOTIFS UPON WHICH THE PLAY IS GROUNDED, OR AT LEAST HINTING, EVOKING, INVITING INTELLECTUAL COMMITMENT TO THE REST OF THE STORY, MAY I INVITE OUR ENCOUNTER WITH THIS PRECIOUS FAMILIAR AND SLIGHTLY WORN STORY.

-ABOUT OUTSIDERS DISCOVERING THE CHRIST WHILE THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT

IS FALLING ALL OVER ITSELF TO PLEASE THE KING.

-A STORY ABOUT WISE ONES, WHO ARE FROM THE WRONG RACE, THE WRONG COLOR, THE WRONG RELIGION, FALLING DOWN ON THEIR KNEES WHILE THE CHOSEN ONES, THE MAINLINERS, ARE BUSILY KEEPING PUBLIC ORDER.

-A STORY ABOUT INSIDERS HAPPILY SUPPORTING THE STATUS QUO POLITICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY, IN THE VERY HALLS OF POWER AND AUTHORITY; WHILE OUTSIDERS ARE EMPTYING OUT THEIR SADDLE BAGS, GIVING LAVISH GIFTS TO A BABY.

-A STORY ABOUT SEEING THE CHILD, KNEELING BEFORE THE CHRIST, AND NO LONGER BEING ABLE TO TRAVEL THE OLD ROADS.

"WE RETURNED TO OUR PLACES, THESE KINGDOMS

BUT NO LONGER AT EASE HERE, IN THE OLD DISPENSATION

WITH AN ALIEN PEOPLE CLUTCHING THEIR GODS."

IF IT IS JESUS THE CHRIST WE HAVE SEEN, WE ARE NO LONGER COMFORTABLE WITH THE STATUS QUO. IF IT IS THE CHRIST WE HAVE WORSHIPED, THERE IS BUSINESS TO ATTEND TO, WORK TO BE DONE, DECISIONS TO BE MADE.

AT THE END OF THE PROLOGUE TO JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN'S NEW BOOK, JESUS, A REVOLUTIONARY BIOGRAPHY, THERE IS AN IMAGINARY CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE AUTHOR AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS. JESUS SAYS:

"I'VE READ YOUR BOOK DOMINIC, AND IT'S QUITE GOOD. SO NOW YOU'RE READY TO LIVE BY MY VISION AND JOIN IN MY PROGRAM?"

"I DON'T THINK I HAVE THE COURAGE, JESUS, BUT I DID DESCRIBE IT WELL, DIDN'T I, AND THE METHOD WAS ESPECIALLY GOOD, WASN'T IT?"

"THANK YOU, DOMINIC, FOR NOT FALSIFYING THE MESSAGE TO SUIT YOUR OWN INCAPACITY. THAT AT LEAST IS SOMETHING."

"IS IT ENOUGH, JESUS?"

"NO, DOMINIC, IT IS NOT."

YOU CAN'T WORSHIP THE CHRIST AND BE COMFORTABLE WITH THE KIND OF RELIGIOUS TRIBALISM THAT IS EITHER BEHIND OR STANDING COMFORTABLY ALONG SIDE THE ETHNIC VIOLENCE WHICH CONTINUES TO CURSE OUR ERA.

YOU CAN'T BOW BESIDE THESE STRANGERS FROM THE EAST AND CONTINUE AT EASE WITH THE SMUG THEOLOGICAL CERTAINTY THAT DEFINES OUR MISSION AS CHRISTIANS IN TERMS OF CONVINCING EVERYBODY TO BECOME

Lutherans or Presbyterians or Baptists or Catholics. You simply can't be on your knees between Melchoir and Gaspar without at least pondering the intriguing possibility that what God wants is some cross actually kneeling before the truth rather than theological and ecclesiastical conformity.

And you can't kneel here knowing what is about to happen to the children of Bethlehem and be at ease, or find tolerable the murder of sixty children, most of them African American, most of them killed in gunfire.

It requires a little effort, a little curiosity to go to Bethlehem. But actually, the crowd, the culture, will sweep you along so that you more or less arrive there without much intentionality.

BUT IF, LIKE THOSE VERY WISE PERSONS, YOU SEE AND KNOW THE CHRIST WHILE YOU ARE THERE, THE ROAD HOME WILL BE DIFFERENT AND YOU WILL BE STRONGER AND MORE COURAGEOUS - AND MORE GENEROUS, AND MORE OF A PILGRIM THAN EVER BEFORE.

MAY SARTON WROTE A POEM, THE BIRTHDAY, WHICH APPEARED IN A LITTLE DEVOTIONAL I TRY TO USE AND I HAVE BEEN READING IT EVERY MORNING SINCE CHRISTMAS.

"WHAT SHALL WE GIVE THE CHILD THIS DAY,

ON THIS SHINING DAY

IN A STARVING WORLD,

WHAT GIFTS, WHAT TOYS, FOR THIS, LOVE'S DEAREST BIRTHDAY?

FOR GOLD, GIVE THE HEART'S HUNGER,

THE HEARTS'S WANT GIVE FOR MYRRH,

FOR HUNGER AND WANT ARE STRONGER

AND PURER AND DEEPER THAN ANYTHING

WE HAVE, THAN ANY JOY WE SING.
THESE AND ONE MORE, THE THIRD,
THESE AND ONE SAVING GRACE,
THE BALSAM-SCENTED WORD,
GREEN IN THE DESOLATE PLACE;
GIVE TO HIS INNOCENCE
OUR HOPE FOR FRANKINCENSE.
NOW LAY DOWN THIRST AND HUNGER
THERE IN THE LONELY MANGER,
AND IN THE DESOLATE PLACE
LAY THE GREEN SAVING GRACE,
THE BOUGH WITHOUT A THORN,
FOR GOD IN MAN IS BORN;
OUT OF ALL GRIEF AND PAIN,
LOVE, BE RENEWED AGAIN!

[SARTON SELECTED-AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE JOURNAL, NOVELS AND POETRY OF MAY SARTON]

AMEN.